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THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR THROUGH THE EYES OF A RUSSIAN DIPLOMAT¹

It is unfortunately true that the average European diplomat does not fully understand the American people and their institutions and consequently misrepresents them in the reports to his government. The extent and seriousness of the misrepresentations depend largely on the differences between the political and social institutions of the country that sends the diplomat and the country to which he is sent. In the middle of the nineteenth century no other two civilized countries were more unlike than Russia and the United States and there were many misstatements made about each other by their representatives. This was not done with any evil intent. It was but natural that a man trained in the philosophy of Nicholas I. should judge American society by a different standard than one who had been brought up on the ideals of Lincoln. The Russian and the American had different backgrounds, different prejudices, different angles of vision, and therefore the objects they sighted seemed different to them. Neither was wholly wrong or wholly right, and the views of each had much in them that was of value to the other. It so happened that Russia had during the Civil War a very able representative in the person of Édouard de Stoeckl, Stoeckl spent about twenty years in Washington in various diplomatic capacities and during that time he married an American wife, formed a large circle of friends among the prominent men of the capital, and learned to admire the American people.² His opinions

¹ This paper is based on the correspondence of Stoeckl with the Russian foreign office, examined by the writer when preparing for the Carnegie Institution of Washington a report supplementary to that section of his *Guide to the Materials for American History in Russian Archives* (Washington, 1917) which related to the archives of the ministry of foreign affairs. When making notes for that section in 1914 he was allowed to carry his search down to 1854 only; in 1917 he was permitted to go on to 1870. All the letters here cited are dated from Washington.

² When Édouard de Stoeckl first came to the United States is not quite clear, but the records show that he was a member of the Russian legation in Washington in 1849-1850. In the winter of 1853 he left Petrograd to go as consul-general to the Hawaiian Islands. When he landed in New York he learned that the Russian minister, Alexander Bodisco, was dead, and that he was expected to take charge of the legation until another man was sent. The outbreak of the Crimean war obliged him to remain at this post and he did such good work that his gov-

are not the results of first impressions but of years of observation in a favorable environment.

From 1854 to 1870 Stoeckl wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Gorchakov, frequently and at some length as he was encouraged to do. Both the emperor and his foreign minister were deeply concerned in what was going on in the United States. Our slavery problem had much in common with their serf question, and our position as a rival to Great Britain had much interest for them at that time.

In 1854 and 1855 Stoeckl was too much occupied in diplomatic matters relating to the Crimean War to give much attention to the domestic affairs of the United States, but beginning with 1856 there was hardly a letter in which he did not make some mention of the difficulties between the North and the South. More than once he raised the question of a possible secession of the Southern States, but almost up to the very outbreak of the conflict he seemed confident that this misfortune would never take place. He gave many reasons for his belief. Secession, he said, is unthinkable because of the economic bonds that bind the North and South. The industrial classes, the farmers of the North and the agricultural classes of the South, who constitute the sane elements of the American population, are dependent on one another and they would never permit the disruption of the Union.³ The Americans as a people, both North and South, are too practical, they are too much absorbed in their material interests, they are too sensible, to break the federal bond—the source of their strength and prosperity—for it is federation and not democracy that is behind their prosperity. Even if the North and the South were foolish enough to desire to separate, the West would never allow it.⁴ The West is daily growing stronger and its large delegation in Congress realizes that the progress of the

ernment appointed him to the vacancy (1857). On January 2 (N.S.), 1856, he married Elizabeth Howard, "American, Protestant, without property", so he reported to the emperor. In 1865 the Russian government increased his pay in appreciation of his excellent work in the United States. In 1866 he was given leave of absence to return to Petrograd and while there the question of the sale of Alaska was taken up and he was instructed to return to his post and open negotiations. When that matter was concluded he asked (July 15/27, 1868) for a long leave on account of his failing health. In the letter he said that he was sixty years of age and that his eyes were so weak that he could not work at night. The leave was granted in September of that year and he left in October. A little after his arrival in Russia he was retired on a pension. The exact date of his death is not recorded in the archives.

³ Aug. 15/27, 1856, no. 1681.

⁴ Oct. 27/Nov. 8, 1856, no. 2217.

West depends on the products of the North and the South and the facilities for transportation to markets offered to it by these two sections. The development of the West is the best guarantee of the permanence of the federation. In his reports for the six months preceding the war, when secession talk was so loud in the capital, Stoeckl expressed a fear that the election of Lincoln and party passions might cause the people to lose their heads and lead them to disrupt the Union; but even then he put that thought aside and argued that this would never happen because the conservative element in the American population, its good sense, its material interests, or some other, as yet unknown, factor would save the situation. He deplored, however, the endless straining and tugging that gradually weakened the bond of union.⁵

The outbreak of war filled Stoeckl with sorrow. In his letter to Gorchakov, written April 15/27, 1861, he said how much it grieved him to see the North and the South hate one another without rhyme or reason when Nature intended them to live together in love and in prosperity. It would seem, he said, as if humanity thirsted for blood and that there were times in the life of each nation when there must be a certain amount of bloodletting.

He next tried to understand and to explain the war. The American conflict suggested to him the nationality struggle in Europe. In the United States, he wrote, each state is "*une communauté à part . . . avec ses lois particulières et souvent avec ses mœurs et ses habitudes différentes*". These American states are kept together by a political tie and if that were cut the whole structure would fall into many pieces and civil war between these pieces would be sure to ensue. The only important difference between the nationality problem in America and in Europe is that in the first case it is complicated by the negro element.

But the negroes are not the cause of the war. It is true, he said, that slavery is opposed to the teachings of religion and the conscience of humanity, but the political and economic safety of the state is paramount to any such considerations. If slavery were really the issue it could be satisfactorily settled without a war. Neither the abolition of slavery nor the preservation of the Union has brought on this conflict, for the men who are responsible for it are as indifferent to the one as to the other. It is these demagogues who are the indirect cause of the trouble. It is they who stir up sectional jealousies and party hatreds, who are ready to sacrifice the welfare of the nation and of the state in order to promote their

⁵ Dec. 23, 1860/Jan. 4, 1861, no. 146.

selfish interests. They do not desire peace; they could not live in its atmosphere. Slavery is a pretext, a godsend to them, particularly to the Puritan preachers and Southern politicians.

But behind the agitator is the system of government that has brought him forth.⁶ That is the enemy, and the cause of the war. The republican form of government, so much talked about by the Europeans and so much praised by the Americans, is breaking down. It has worked well enough until now, when honest and conservative men held office and when the dams which the framers of the Constitution erected against irresponsible democracy held firm; but these barriers are weakening, owing to the rising streams of radicalism and universal suffrage at home, to the recent influx of socialists and anarchists from Europe, and to the coming of such men as Bakunin and Garibaldi. If America does not watch, the waters of radicalism will soon rise so high that they will overflow the dam, sweep away its stabilizing institutions, and leave it a prey to anarchy. What can be expected from a country where men of humble origin are elevated to the highest positions, where honest men refuse to vote and dishonest ones cast their ballots at the bidding of shameless politicians? This is democracy in practice, the democracy that the European theorists rave about.⁷ If they could only see it at work they would cease their agitation and thank God for the government which they are enjoying.⁸

It is quite evident that Stoeckl had little respect for the leaders of American democracy. To him the members of Congress were a noisy, fanatic, intriguing, and dishonest lot. The men higher up in the government were mediocre, inefficient, and ignorant of the fundamental principles of real statesmanship. His comments on Lincoln and Seward are interesting.

The Russian diplomat had a high regard for Lincoln, the man, and spoke of his honest face, courteous behavior,⁹ kindly disposition, and fine character. But for Lincoln, the President of the United States, he had little to say that was complimentary. He thought him weak, undecided, inexperienced, and the tool of unscrupulous

⁶ Nov. 29/Dec. 11, 1864, no. 1900.

⁷ Nov. 22/Dec. 4, 1863.

⁸ On the margin of Stoeckl's letter Gorchakov made this comment: "Je l'aurais voulu mais j'en doute."

⁹ Feb. 28/Mar. 12, 1861. "Sans posséder une figure remarquable, M. Lincoln a une physionomie agréable et honnête. Ses manières sont celles d'un homme qui a passé toute sa vie dans une petite ville de l'Ouest, mais il a été poli et prévenant envers tous [meaning, on the occasion of the first diplomatic reception] et en général le corps diplomatique n'a eu qu'à se louer de l'accueil."

intriguers and office-seekers who selected him for the high office because of his very defects, so that they might use him.¹⁰ Though at times he handled them rather skillfully, yet on the whole he was no match for them. They turned the White House into a political club and worried the life out of the President with their recommendations, until the poor man complained (to Stoeckl) that he suffered more from his friends than from his enemies. Frightened by the clamor of the radicals and the demands of the conservatives, the captain retired to his cabin and left the ship of state to the mercy of the winds and the waves.¹¹ There was nothing to indicate that Lincoln had either a far-sighted policy or an immediate plan. The great trouble with him was that the task was too great for him. These criticisms of Lincoln were made in a very friendly spirit, for, as stated already, Stoeckel had much good-will towards the President and his death at the hands of the assassin affected him deeply.¹²

Senator Seward made a deep impression on Stoeckl, who spoke of him as the ablest American statesman, as the man above all others who should be President of the United States; but Secretary of State Seward proved to be a disappointment and the Russian diplomat was forced to put him into the class of small politicians and leave him there. Stoeckl was disgusted with Seward's irresoluteness, his lack of strong convictions, his ignorance of international affairs, his arrogance, his posing as a great man. This sudden change in his estimation of Seward came almost immediately after the latter had become Secretary of State. Very soon after the inauguration Stoeckl gave a dinner to the members of the cabinet, and when it was over and all the other guests had departed, Seward remained to talk over matters of state. He assured Stoeckl that the North would not force the seceded states to come back into the Union but would leave them undisturbed until such time as they themselves should express a desire to come back. He went even further, and asked that a secret interview be arranged at the Russian embassy between himself and a Southern commissioner, who was at the time in the capital, to talk over a conciliatory policy. But when Stoeckl encountered Seward two or three days later at the residence of Lord Lyons, the Secretary of State had changed his mind completely and announced that if war should break out all commercial relations with the South would come to an end.

¹⁰ Jan. 1/13, 1864.

¹¹ Nov. 6/18, 1861.

¹² Apr. 3/15, 1865.

Stoeckl tells another story illustrating the fickleness of Seward. About the middle of December, 1862, the Secretary of State informed the ministers of France and Russia that he was through with the administration, through with Stanton, through with the radical gang in Congress, through with Washington, that he had resigned and was going home in a few days. On the strength of these positive statements Stoeckl called on Seward to express his regrets and to bid him good-bye. Imagine his astonishment when Seward assured him that it was all a mistake, that he and Stanton had made up, and that from now on they would be good friends and work together. These and similar incidents caused Stoeckl to lose confidence and respect for Seward and to pay little attention to what he said.

Like many others, Stoeckl made guesses as to the duration of the war. In June, 1861, he thought it would be over by winter; in August he predicted that it would continue to the end of the year or possibly until spring. By that time he felt that the North would be exhausted and would quit. When spring came around he contented himself with such general remarks as, "the end of the conflict is not yet in sight", and "the conquest of the South is still an open question", and this tune of uncertainty he sang until the very end.

He also attempted to look into the future to see what would eventually be the outcome of the conflict and what would become of the once powerful United States. On one thing he was quite certain: no matter what the outcome might be, the old Union was gone, the breach between the North and the South was irreparable. When he had the opportunity, he advised those near him that the thing for the North to do was to make a virtue of necessity and to accept the inevitable. To his mind the best solution was the political independence and the commercial union of the two sections, a kind of zollverein, and if this were brought about the chances were, so he believed, that in time the broken parts would knit together.¹³

Though he lost confidence in American institutions and in American statesmen, Stoeckl nevertheless retained his admiration for the American people. He was never quite sure of them. At times he wondered whether he really understood them, and occasionally he referred to them as an exceptional people. More than once he told his government that similarity of conditions in the Old and in the New World does not necessarily produce similarity of results. In the United States, for example, revolution, war, disorganized government, and even disorganized finance do not greatly affect the

¹³ Jan. 29/Feb. 10, 1863, no. 342.

prosperity of the country. In the United States the very poor are well off. Nothing is impossible for this extraordinary people, nothing is difficult for them. When the war opened they responded in a wonderful manner to Lincoln's call and when reverses came they faced them manfully. When one army was destroyed they raised another, when one appropriation was spent they voted another, never doubting the ultimate success of the struggle. One of the characteristics of this nation is its confidence in itself, in its destiny, in its belief that "the best government that God ever saw" will last forever.¹⁴ With that vision before them the Americans plunge right on, regardless of obstacles and dangers.¹⁵ The black clouds that now hang over the country do not excite any apprehension, for they see the sun through them. If one expresses a misgiving he is told not to worry needlessly, that America has always succeeded in whatever it has undertaken; and, strange to say, it has. In his letter of January 12/24, 1865, Stoeckl wrote to his government that the war would go on for some time to come and even if the South were put down the problems of governing a conquered people would be great and difficult. Notwithstanding this, the Americans are so full of conceit and illusions that they really believe that after this bloody war the Southerners will submit tamely and become peaceful and law-abiding citizens. Can one imagine anything more absurd? Yet that is exactly what they say and believe.¹⁶

The end of the war caught Stoeckl quite unprepared and caused him to exclaim that one can never tell what may happen "*chez ce peuple exceptionnel*". Only a few months back, he said, the statesmen were despondent, the debt was going up, and the credit going down; then, all of a sudden and without any good reason, financial confidence was restored, thousands flocked to fill the gaps in the army, and behold, the fight was won. He insisted, however, that credit for putting down the insurrection was due to the American people, to its sacrifices, to its material resources, and not to the men in power.

¹⁴ Jan. 12/24, 1865.

¹⁵ Nov. 16/28, 1859.

¹⁶ That Gorchakov did not encourage Stoeckl in his pessimistic vein may be seen from the following passage in a letter written by the former to the latter in February, 1862: "*La confiance que manifeste le Nord dans l'issue finale de la crise n'a-t-elle pas des fondemens plus sérieux que la jactance particulière aux démocraties?*" Here is another letter written a month earlier and approved by the emperor: "*L'Empereur est persuadé que les hommes d'État qui ont su apprécier d'un point de vue si élevé les intérêts politiques extérieurs [Mason-Slidell affair] de leur pays, sauront également placer leur politique intérieure au dessus des passions populaires.*"

He realized, of course, that there were many serious problems ahead, but he expressed confidence that the American people would solve them, too, now that they had survived the convulsions of war and had come out of them stronger than ever.¹⁷ To be sure, they lacked strong leadership but they could do without it. When Lincoln died some people thought that the world was coming to an end, but here was Johnson carrying on the affairs of state in a very able manner.¹⁸ To Stoeckl the biggest problem before the nation was to get the Southerners to come back into the Union, and on the possibility of bringing this about he expressed some doubt. When, however, that question was also satisfactorily settled and he saw how eager both sides were to forgive and forget, Stoeckl shrugged his shoulders and remarked that all predictions fail when one has to do with a people that Providence has taken under her special protection.¹⁹

Stoeckl was honest enough to face once more the question of American democracy, the democracy that was tottering and the fall of which was looked for in Europe. Has it stood the test? Yes, it has, he answered. It has weathered the storms of war and has suffered no serious injuries. However, it still had another test before it, the test of reconstruction. Can it stand up under the turmoils of, what he called, the political revolution that was at hand?²⁰ He thought it might if the suffrage were limited, if the demagogues were kept in place, and if honest and conservative men

¹⁷ Apr. 2/14, 1865, no. 715.

¹⁸ Oct. 15/27, 1865. "Ce qui se passe ici est si extraordinaire, les événements se succèdent avec une telle rapidité qu'on peut à peine suivre et piger [or juger?] ce qui existe aujourd'hui, mais jamais faire des conjectures sur le lendemain. Il semble qu'une Providence veille sur les destinées de ce peuple et Se trouve exprès là pour aplanir les obstacles et les dangers qu'il rencontre dans sa marche rapide. En effet, la guerre finit subitement et au moment où l'on s'y attendait le moins. La lutte une fois terminée par la chute de Richmond, le centre de la Confédération, les hommes du Sud déposent partout les armes et se soumettent, par calcul et avec des arrière-pensées, si l'on veut, mais ils se soumettent, et, guidés par leurs intérêts, ils acceptent l'alliance avec le Nord dont l'industrie et les capitaux leur sont nécessaires pour faire disparaître les ravages de la dernière guerre. Enfin, la mort de Mr. Lincoln donne des inquiétudes sérieuses au pays, on n'a aucune confiance dans son successeur de hasard; il se trouva cependant que Mr. Johnson est l'homme des circonstances et déploie, dans l'œuvre difficile de la reconstruction, des talents et une fermeté de caractère bien supérieurs à ceux de Mr. Lincoln. En un mot, après une lutte si longue et si acharnée les États Unis rentrent dans l'ordre et reprennent leur équilibre avec une rapidité qui déjoue les calculs [les] mieux fondés."

¹⁹ Aug. 3/15, 1867.

²⁰ Sept. 5/17, 1866, no. 1852.

were induced to hold office. In one of his letters he expressed what seemed to be a sincere wish, that the American people would demonstrate to the world that democracy could be kept from developing into radicalism and anarchy, a political phenomenon rare in the annals of republics. During the year 1867 he watched the stormy skies, often wondering whether the ship would weather the wind and the waves that were threatening to engulf it. In February, 1868, he caught a ray of sunshine through the clouds and announced to his government the glad news that the American people would not succumb to the political revolution any more than they had to the Civil War.²¹ At the same time he advised that they should reform their political institutions.

The above observations by the Russian diplomat suggest many thoughts for discussion, but only two or three of them may be taken up here. In view of the insistence of certain writers that Lincoln was ugly, ungainly, and boorish, the personal description of him by Stoeckl is instructive. The Russian knew good society and fine manners, and when he says that Abraham Lincoln has a "*physionomie agréable et honnête*" and that he was polite and thoughtful of others, his opinion should carry weight.

Though Lincoln and Stoeckl met more or less often, yet the former failed to make any other impression on the latter than that of a well-meaning, thoroughly honest, but weak man. Almost everything that Stoeckl said about Lincoln in the five years' correspondence with his government is given in this paper. There were months at a stretch when the President was not even mentioned and so far as the Russian was concerned did not exist.

One has little complaint to make of the likeness of Uncle Sam as drawn by Stoeckl. Here and there physical and temperamental peculiarities are over-emphasized but on the whole the portrait is a fairly good one; the form, the features, and the outward expression are all delineated. It is not, however, an artistic piece of work because it fails to bring out the inner soul of the subject. From the beginning of the conflict to the end Stoeckl missed the spirit of idealism that animated the American people. There is nowhere in his writings a sentence or a line to indicate that he was conscious of its existence. When he thought we would not fight, it was because of our good sense and economic interests; when we did fight it was because of the demagogues; when we won the war it was because of our resources and determination; and when we reconstructed the Union it was because of a special providence. To him,

²¹ Feb. 16/28, 1866, no. 9.

as to thousands of Europeans before and after him, the Americans were little better than efficient, thinking economic machines.

It is difficult to explain how a man of Stoeckl's diplomatic ability and intellectual force, with such unusual opportunities for the study of society, could live through that stirring period in American history without catching some of its deeper meanings. It may have been due to his Russian background, or to his training to regard the safety of institutions as of more importance than the welfare of the individual, or to the peculiar ambassadorial atmosphere in which he lived. Whatever the reasons were, the fact remains that he failed to understand the spiritual side of the people among whom he lived. This raises the question of the value of diplomatic papers for the study of social history and the value of the diplomat as an agent for international conciliation. Without generalizing too much one may say, at least in so far as America is concerned, that they are of doubtful value. The average diplomat of continental Europe reaches America with certain preconceived ideas of our national characteristics and he is pleased with himself if he discovers evidence to prove that he is right. While at the capital he lives in his own little circle, which amuses itself in pointing out our shortcomings, he associates with the artificial society of Washington and Newport, and seldom comes into close touch with the heart and soul of the people. Yet it is these diplomats who are regarded as the authority on the countries in which they live; it is they who educate foreign public opinion; and it is they who influence the makers of war and peace. They are in part responsible for the idea that has gone abroad that the Americans are chiefly interested in money-getting; and this idea has taken such hold that it is doubtful whether even this World War has done much to dispel it. In the face of all the sacrifices made and the blood shed, a large part of the world is still unconvinced that America entered the war not for the purpose of gain but in pursuit of an ideal.

FRANK A. GOLDER.